

The Fight for the Ride

The Role of the Black Church in the Montgomery Bus
Boycott

Tayra Algera
S1272667



Universiteit
Leiden

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Introduction

Rosa Parks refused to stand up in the bus for a white person. This led to her arrest on December 1st 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. With this refusal, the first step in resistance towards public segregation was a fact. Her arrest “occurred in the context of an ongoing struggle against the mistreatment and humiliation of blacks on the city’s buses” (Coleman, Nee and Rubinowitz, 669). In the previous years blacks had already begun openly questioning the system, starting with the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* which ended school segregation. This however brought delays with it, therefore the changes blacks hoped for seemed out of reach, until all elements came together and a bus boycott was set in motion. “Mrs. Parks’ arrest led to the 381-day Montgomery bus boycott, which was coordinated by the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)” (Entin, 734). On that same day the African-American community came together and started a yearlong bus boycott to end segregation on the busses in Montgomery Alabama.

Ever since the years of slavery blacks were seen as inferior to whites, and they were treated that way. Even after the emancipation of slavery, blacks were still dominated in many aspects of life; socially, economically, politically and personally. This form of domination was carried out through a system of segregation, usually euphemistically described as ‘separate but equal’, but equal was in fact never really equal. Blacks and some whites questioned this, but seldom openly for the consequences they could endure were severe. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) that the question of racial discrimination was openly brought to the public throughout the nation. The CRM was a movement against racial segregation and for equality in the United States in the 20th century. It was a movement setting out to change the old ways of the United States of America, especially in the South where racial discrimination was most common. Desegregated public accommodations and schools, the end of Jim Crow and ultimately voting rights for all blacks. For this to happen action had to be taken. Movements had to gain momentum as well as the attention from the American people and the government. But - to take on the inequality taunting so many for hundreds of years wasn’t going to be easy.

Many scholars (Lawson and Payne, Killian and Fairclough) take the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement after World War II (WWII). This moment was chosen because when the war broke out in Europe, blacks were part of the regiments send to fight the war, which created controversy within the African-American community. The participation of the United

States in the Second World War was motivated as an attempt to stop the discrimination, maltreatment and murder on people belonging to specific minority groups within the population, namely the Jews. This stimulated the debate about the situation of minorities 'at home'. Moreover, the common goal in actual combat brought people from different backgrounds and races closer together and made differences seem less important or even beneficial.

Many African-American soldiers fought a war in Europe against a totalitarian regime where an entire group of the population was prosecuted for their beliefs. This created an unjustifiable situation, because at the same time blacks were not treated as equal in the US. This created controversy within the country but also within the international community. "The United States could not easily defend discrimination within its own borders" (Lawson and Payne, 5), not if they were fighting a war against discrimination abroad. The American government needed to look at its laws and initiate change within the country. As argued by Lawson and Payne the national government was key in shaping the CRM and its outcome, while at the same time national organizations were needed to give the push to the public and the national government for accepting the change so desperately needed (Lawson and Payne, 3). However this change could not take place overnight. Change needed to be demanded by the people. Lawson and Payne's argument therefore is a valid one, seeing as action needed to be stimulated by the people and set in motion by the government. Organizations during the CRM were key in acquiring the governments' attention.

One of the first changes that came in focus were the segregation laws in public schools. Initiated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a court case; *Brown vs. board of education* in 1954 was an early step in getting government attention and demanding legal change. This happened as stated in Lawson and Payne, "The supreme court put to rest the legal fiction that under a system of enforced racial separation Black students could receive equal education" (Lawson and Payne, 11). This was a first step in creating more equality in the United States. This first step gave the incentive for an even larger protest: the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama 1955.

Although the question of racial relations was not absent in American society in the first decade after WW II, equality was not an actual topic on the political agenda. To get the attention from public and local and national politicians, appealing action had to be taken, by inspiring individuals, but also by civil groups and organizations. One of these important organizations for marshalling and organizing protest was the Black Church. Defined by Gaines II as "a

collective, largely denominational body of churches comprised primarily of African American people who, through communal worship, race, consciousness, and civic engagement, operate as a locus of spiritual empowerment and social agency” (Gaines II, 368). Hence ‘the black church’ refers to the name for a wide range of local churches with (mainly) African-American members. This definition therefore links the black churches together, despite denominational differences. It has to be noted however, that religion and the church are two separate elements. That is, the black church in this instance is referred to as an institution, more exactly, as a combination of churches working together towards a common goal. Religion on the other hand refers to a set of convictions and the practice of worship. Though the church used religion by means of sermons and scripture to get the message across, the message of segregation was not of a religious nature. This entails that the church was used to mobilize, motivate and bring blacks together for a common cause. In this instance the church was used as the organizational foundation for mobilization, and religion was used to inspire people to form the basis of action.

Righteousness had often been a motivating factor in Christianity, translated – by a minority usually, but none the less – first into civil action and later, as a fruit hereof, in legislation. The abolition of slavery, in which the Quakers had played an important role, can be mentioned as an example. Leadership played a crucial role in this process, as is most clearly expressed in the person of Dr. Martin Luther King (MLK). MLK was a reverend and often combined preaching in his church and his speeches in public, as his most famous address to the people demonstrated. In this address – usually referred to as ‘I have a dream’ - he used a prophecy of Isaiah as a vision for the people in his own time today. By making people aware and by talented leadership the black church contributed to changing racial relationships in the United States in the first decades after WW II. The focus of this thesis will lay on the role the Black Church played in mobilizing support and in actual action taken in the Civil Rights Movement during the bus boycott in Alabama in 1955-1956. Without the black churches the bus boycott would not have been possible. This thesis is an attempt to do justice to their role by mentioning and elaborating on crucial elements of the Black Church contribution to changing racial relations in the United States. This can be linked to recent literature done by academics like Calhoun-Brown, Fairclough, Williams (2002) and Chappell, who emphasize the role of religion and religious institutions in the CRM.

Alabama can be considered as one of the central deep Southern states where the CRM grew to become a dominant factor in changing racial relations. The process of mobilizing people against segregation and discrimination cultivated here. This state became the scene of

several of the classic CRM confrontations including; some of the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham and Selma movements, region wide campus sit-ins and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Analyzing this particular state, will therefore provide beneficial information to the main question of which role the black church played during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Montgomery before the boycott was a place where discrimination and segregation were customary. Rufus Lewis, a prominent leader during the boycott, explains the living situation in Montgomery “Blacks lived in one neighborhood, whites lived in others. There was no mixture of black and whites in the various neighborhoods”. There was also a sharp distinction between activities and type of jobs between whites and blacks. “Blacks usually was the servants and did the labor”. Blacks usually worked in low-paying jobs that acquired a lot of manual work. This made blacks economically dependent on whites for work and pay. “They didn't work together except in areas where blacks and whites agreed on some things”, as Lewis recalled. Montgomery before the boycott was therefore a place where blacks were discriminated against, segregated, economically dependent and formed the lower class of society.

The bus boycott can be considered the first major event in the process of trying to change public opinion and implementing legislation to secure equal rights for people of different racial background in the US. The immediate cause for the bus boycott was a simple one: Rosa Parks, an African-American citizen of Montgomery, refused to change her ‘white-labelled’ seat in the bus she was travelling in. But the impact of this relatively small act of protest was huge. It became a catalyst in the struggle by the Civil Rights Movement for equal rights.

This thesis investigates the role of the Black Church in the process of motivating and mobilizing people. Not just to speak out and take a stand, but if necessary also to face violence and suffering. From the point of view of motivating black public opinion against racial discrimination especially in the southern part of the US, the bus boycott might be considered a success. But in a broader perspective one might say that a battle was won, not the war. In the decade to follow the boycott created a platform for equal rights which also had to be anchored in legislation. This struggle demanded endurance more than a sole protest. This thesis scrutinizes the role of the Black Church in this process.

Research in this thesis has focused on academic sources, interviews and oral histories. This has been done in order to understand the boycott from a perspective of both academics and actual participants in the movement. In two different chapters of this thesis different elements of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the role of the black church during this boycott will be analyzed. Explained in the first chapter is the road which led to Montgomery Bus Boycott. It gives a brief history of the black church and its involvement in the African-American

community together with an overview of the changing landscape of the black church after WWII. Additionally it deals with civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Furthermore it will be explained why a bus boycott was the best way to directly impact the system. To conclude the chapter the role of clergymen in the boycott will be discussed. Chapter two deals with the way the boycott was organized. It discusses the use of non-violence and religion to bring the message across. It continues by discussing the non-participation of the white churches. Furthermore continued mobilization during the 1956 is discussed which cultivated into the U.S. Supreme Court declaring segregation on busses in Montgomery unconstitutional.

1. The Road to Change

The black church has played a significant role in the lives of African-Americans ever since the emancipation of slavery. Many scholars have demonstrated this central position. Gaines II, Fairclough, Chappell, Findlay and Glock argue that throughout history the capacity of the black church to encourage political and social changes is something undisputed. Fairclough argues “when former slaves organized free communities, they structured their lives around three institutions: the family, the school and the church” (Fairclough, 9). In agreement with Fairclough it is argued by Calhoun-Brown that “churches have traditionally been viewed as places of stability and strength in the African-American community” (Calhoun-Brown, 169). Former slaves counted on black leadership to guide them through their new acquired freedom. Preachers became leaders of these new formed African-American communities. This is because black clergymen worked independently from whites. They did not rely on whites for salary or approval on what to preach. This independence from whites, made the church one of the only independent entities within the African-American community.

Because of the significance of the church through the years, and the central position of preachers within black communities, “the black church remained the only institution with the potential to mobilize blacks in a holy crusade against racial segregation” (Fairclough, 12). Gaines II also notes the strength of the African-American community throughout the years, stating that “the African American church, in particular, is one agent whose capacity to affect change in social and political matters has been noted throughout history” (Gaines II, 366). As the church plays a crucial role in this thesis, this chapter gives a short overview of the ‘landscape’ of churches after World War II, especially in the South of the US. Then it describes developments within the black church concerning the emerging anti-segregation mood.

The elimination of the all-white democratic primary starting in the late 1940’s, made the Southern black church gradually a new point of focus for newly rising black political activities (Vedlitz, Alston, and Pinkele, 367). One might say that the church was primarily concerned with purely religious matters before World War II. Social action and protest were not, or barely, on the agenda before the boycott and the CRM. The focus was mainly directed inwards. But this situation was about to change. In society the matter of racial inequality was also beginning to play a role in politics. The black church was confronted with this change, and was about to promote it by discussing racial inequality in church meetings. The black church was no longer not only involved in religious matters, but was about take a stance in social

matters with political implications. This marked an important change within the black church which led to the organizational role it played during the bus boycott and other protests during the CRM.

There was a steady increase in people attending Sunday service from the 1940's to the 1950's. The amount of people who said they attended church on Sunday in 1940 was about 40 percent of the population. In the 1950's this percentage grew to 59 percent of the population saying they attended church the previous Sunday (Glock, 78). This demonstrates an increase in church attendance of 47.5 percent within ten years. This indicates the church gaining a more significant place in the lives of blacks, arguably in relation to the boycott. As an increasing part of the population became actively involved with the churches during the boycott, the audience that could be influenced grew. This was of mayor importance in respect to mobilizing people in the case of the bus boycott. In the Sunday services information about the boycott was given, but additionally its cause was underlined by connecting explanations of the Scriptures to the actual situation of discrimination against the black minority.

The black church and its leaders set out to eliminate segregation. This was validated a year earlier with the Supreme Court decision to end school segregation. With this change in legislation, black church leaders began to align themselves with national politics. This was possible due to the independence clergymen had from whites. As argued by Gaines II, "The independent and insularly nature of the Black Church cultivated these ideals and allowed the church to function autonomously" (370). This independence of the black church was mainly economic independence. Therefore clergymen were the ideal people to orchestrate political action, and be actively engaged in the process of desegregation.

Another change in the landscape of the black church after World War II, was a significant one in demeanor. The church and its leadership went from being, as argued by Hines and Pierce, an "accommodating" type to aligning themselves with a new "protesting" culture (162). This was not so much a change towards taking a political stance, but more a change in how the church identified itself with direct action. At the beginning of the movement there was no actual political determination or strategic plan about how to change discrimination by political means. The first involvement sprang out of indignity in concrete situations. This aroused protest and local black churches tended to support these protests. Only later on did black church leaders begin to think about a strategy of how to use politics as a means to bring about the desired change. This additionally meant that church leaders began to take on a different role within the church.

To find out how blacks identified leaders before and during years of protest in the CRM, an academic study has been done by Ralph H. Hines and James E. Pierce. Table 1 shows that during the pre-protest period – before 1955, ministers were not seen as prominent leaders by the African-American community. Hines and Pierce defined minister leadership in this period as “accommodative”, and “fundamentally powerless in the over-all structure of the wider community” (166). This accommodative mood changed with the initiation of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. As Hines and Pierce argue, “a new style Negro leadership came forward to take the reins” (167). With this change in demeanor, the African-American community started to see ministers in a new light.

TABLE 1
IDENTIFIED LEADERS IN THE PRE-PROTEST NEGRO COMMUNITY
BY OCCUPATION AND FREQUENCY OF CHOICES

Category	Occupation	Frequency of Choices*
Most prominent	Railroad employee	13
	College teacher	11
Prominent	College teacher or official	11
	Businessman	11
Not prominent but a leader	Minister	11
	Public school teacher	10

*Frequency of choice refers to the number of choices made by the panel of “experts” in delineating community leaders. If a presumed leader did not receive 50 percent of the panel’s choices, he was not considered eligible for inclusion in any category. Leadership in this study relates to those individuals having some community-wide appeal and recognition.

⁷ For a complete description of the socio-economic and political setting of Montgomery and environs, see Lawrence D. Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1959); Martin L. King, Jr., *Strive Toward Freedom* (New York, 1958); and Norman W. Walter, “The Walking City, A History of the Montgomery Boycott,” *Negro History Bulletin*, XX (October, 1956), (November, 1956), (February, 1957) and (April, 1957).

⁸ Alabama State College is situated on the east side of Montgomery.

(Hines and Pierce, 164)

Table 4 shows a change in black public opinion during the protest period. With this change in opinion, blacks started to acknowledge ministers as prominent leaders in protest, ministers were even listed as most prominent according to the African-American community. By use of these two tables the importance of ministers as leaders during the protest period between the years of 1955-1956 is shown. This also shows the importance of the church to the people, and the link the church and its clergymen had to leadership in the CRM.

Category	Occupation	*Frequency of Choices
Most prominent	Minister	13
	Minister	8
	College teacher	7
Prominent	Businessman	13
	Minister	13
	Lawyer	10
	Railroad employee	7
Not prominent but a leader	School teacher	13
	Minister	10
	Housewife	11
	Minister	10
	Minister	8

*See explanation for frequency of choices under Table 1.

(Hines and Pierce, 168)

The church was not the only entity to try and change the discriminatory position of blacks. Other organizations against segregation were founded before the battle really took off after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Pre-eminent among the civil rights organizations in 1950 was the NAACP (437, Meier). The NAACP was founded for the sole purpose of fighting for equal rights. Founded in 1909-1910, the NAACP was a prominent player in the field of civil rights long before the CRM took off. The NAACP was the first interracial anti-segregation organization in the U.S, mainly in the North, and was founded by highly educated whites and blacks to fight inequality.

It can be argued that this kind of organization, in contrast with mobilization by the church, was less of a grass-root movement. As argued by Morris; “it did not emerge within the black community, nor were the black masses involved in shaping the organization at the outset” (13). There was a hierarchy in place within the organization, this mean that the decision-making process was highly centralized (Morris, 13). The NAACP set out to change mainstream American opinion of blacks through legal action. As argued by Meier, the NAACP set out to attain full constitutional rights for blacks, by means of putting political pressure on the courts (438). The NAACP was closely linked to the black church, this had multiple reasons. Firstly, the NAACP often found its meeting place in churches. This was mainly because the black church was independent from the white power structure and therefore created a safe place for meetings. Secondly, the NAACP gained most of its funding through the black church. Thirdly, many of the NAACP leaders were local ministers (Morris 1989, 15).

This indicates the early involvement of the church as both a place of sanctuary and a place for mobilization. The NAACP brought the local church leaders together and informed them about the organizational structures of the NAACP. This in-depth knowledge of an organization and the skills the church leaders picked up “enhanced the community status of local leaders” (Morris 1989, 15). This enhanced status of church leaders and their knowledge about organizational structures was beneficial during the boycott, mainly because church leaders had this new found status which made their community see them even more as leaders, but also because they knew how to set up an organization and how to maintain it. The combined forces of both the NAACP and the church therefore set out to have a great influence on how the Montgomery Bus Boycott was organized, managed and executed.

The NAACP was not, however, an organization with much involvement from the black population. As Morris argued; “the NAACP has never been able to organize a mass base” (15). This is why the boycott had to come from and be organized by the church, whose mass base was immense. There are four reasons why it was imperative for the black church to have organized and managed the boycott instead of the NAACP.

First of all, the mass base the church could gather was vital in maintaining the boycott for the period of time it did. Secondly, the elevated status of the church leaders made them leaders in the eyes of the people. This was fundamental in getting their message across because people already valued the opinions of clergymen. Thirdly the church was not organized as the NAACP was with their centralized decision-making process. Leadership and organization in the movement came from the church and its ministers, but it was a boycott of the people. “It was both church based and structurally linked to the major community organization of the Black community” (Morris 1999, 525). The fourth reason why the NAACP was not the right organization to run the boycott is that the NAACP was too focused on legal issues. The church on the other hand, pushed for immediate direct action. “With the church taking a more direct approach while including the community, there was a “shift in emphasis from legalism to direct action” (437, Meier). Therefore the combination of having both a legal strategy and direct action can be defined as a strong approach towards ending segregation.

Another important organization during the boycott was the Montgomery Improvement Organization (MIA). This organization was more directly aligned with the black church. MIA was founded because local leaders decided that if this protest were to succeed, they would need an organizational structure to guide them (Morris 1989, 43). It was also created to “direct a protracted boycott, negotiate with the city commissioners and bus line, and persuade Montgomery’s white citizens that a change was necessary” (Wilson, 303). On the afternoon of

the first day of the boycott, at the Zion Church in Alabama, eighteen leaders came together and created MIA to direct the protest (Burns, 10). Burns states that “they quickly elected officers, set up committees, decided on demands, and drew up an agenda for the 7 P.M. mass meeting” (10). That same day Martin Luther King Jr. was elected as the first president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (Burns, 1). MLK, described by Findlay as “a young black Baptist minister who, along with his supporters, linked profound moral criticism of segregation with the use of new, much more dynamic protest tactics of mass rallies (centered in the African-American churches) and economic boycotts, which quickly energized an entire African-American community in the Deep South to effective resistance”(20).

On that same evening MLK gave his first speech as to motivate people to participate in the Bus Boycott. This was the first step in mass mobilization. The MIA tied all the previous smaller local organizations also striving for equality together. Furthermore the MIA, with King as its leader, “became the organization of organizations” (Morris 1989, 41). As Morris remarked:

“The genius of these movement organizations [NAACP, MIA] was their ability to unite community leader by bringing them directly into leadership positions while simultaneously organizing the black masses. They were able to organize the black masses because they themselves were mass-based organizations that had grown directly out of a mass-based institution, the black church” (46).

This shows the importance of the church in creating well-working anti-segregation organizations. The church, in this instance, had throughout the years, formed the base on which the local civil rights organization were founded.

Both the MIA and NAACP were civil rights organizations that made a great difference before during and after the CRM. “Civil rights organizations not only internalized the ideas about justice, liberation, hope, love, and suffering that had been preached in the churches; they also used church property to convene their own meetings and usually made appeals for support at church conferences” (Cone, 759). Both civil rights organizations had connections to the church, but differed in the type of organizations they were.

The MIA differed from the NAACP on multiple fronts. Where the NAACP was run by well-educated academics, MIA was locally run by black ministers and community leaders and were in control of the local decision-making process (Morris 1989, 46). MIA was also less focused on legal issues. Furthermore MIA, as an organization, was more closely linked to the church and its community than the NAACP. This local organization, as Morris argues “inherited the vibrant church culture, with its tradition of bringing whole congregations into

community activities, a guarantee of mass-participation” (1989, 47). This again demonstrates the importance of church culture within the CRM organizations and in bringing people together for a common cause. MIA was not just based on organizational structures and rules of conduct, rather the organization had more depth to it, due to the underlying church culture.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was, as described by Burns, a “thoroughly local movement, despite its external support” (4). It was the local African-America community coming together to fight for what they believed they deserved. The word community here is key in that without blacks coming together as a community and without organizations like MIA and the church bringing these people together, the boycott would not have worked. “It was the boycott method itself that shifted power to the Black masses, for it required that large numbers of individuals engage in collective action” (Morris 1999, 525). Because organizations like MIA were so closely linked to the community and the church, they could form the basis for this collective action. Public transport proved to be unforeseen and effective focus point to bring increasing awareness and concrete action together.

In the 1950's many blacks took busses to work, mainly because they could not afford to have their own cars. Blacks however had to adhere to special seating arrangements on the busses. Blacks could not sit in the front of the busses, these were places reserved for whites. Additionally when all seats were taken, and a white person walked in, blacks were obliged to give up their seat to that white person. As Rufus Lewis described it “The blacks get on in the back and the whites get on in the front. The blacks sit down from the back up, and the whites sit down from the front back” (Lewis). This was the cause of a grand feeling of injustice by blacks and therefore a main reason for protest. A considerable part of the population, namely 39 percent (Morris 1989, 41)) – of bus-travelers in 1950 in Montgomery were black. The bus companies depended on them for revenue - as stated by Hines and Pierce, 70 percent of the revenue bus companies made came from blacks (167), not taking the bus therefore caused economic pressure on the bus companies. Consequently a bus boycott could have the desired effect the blacks hoped for, namely; the bus companies ending segregation on the busses in Montgomery.

The bus boycott took place at exactly the right time in the entire process of protest. It proved to be a cause of action that aroused mass support. First from the Afro-Americans in Alabama, but also on a nation-wide and even international scale. Reverend Shuttlesworth was one of the leaders of the black church, most prominently in Birmingham in the early 1960's.

He played a significant role during the Civil Rights Movement and during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Mannis, who wrote a book on Shuttlesworth, claimed Shuttlesworth to “represent many important themes in civil rights, and African American religious history, not the least of which is his role as pastor or, perhaps better as “civil rights preacher” (2). Reverend Shuttlesworth described in an interview for *Eyes on the Prize* the importance of the boycott happening when it did.

“Here in Montgomery, I say all the elements came together. There was the idea, there was a man, then there was God's power and all these come together. And, then it's time for a movement. There was Martin Luther King, a new young, a new man out of Boston University had come to pastor Dexter Avenue Church, there was a need, there was—from '54 up to now the moving and musings in people's hearts and so Montgomery protest sparked the opportunity for a movement wherein Negroes could rise up actively and challenge the system without violence”. (Shuttlesworth)

This statement makes clear that action came at the right time, that blacks were committed to their cause and that they would follow their leader, MLK. The “need” as Shuttlesworth described it, became dire. Therefore the direction of the NAACP, which was mainly taking a legal stance against segregation, lasted too long. Locals were anxious to challenge segregation directly. Direct mass action, organized by the church, its leaders, and organizations like the MIA, was the next step in fighting for equal rights.

Clergymen played a crucial role in setting up, maintaining and organizing the bus boycott. As the leaders of their community they had multiple functions and responsibilities towards their community, especially in translating religious values into ethics, social action and political statements. Clergymen had besides their usual tasks of uniting people, giving moral guidance and explaining the ethical implications of faith, also the tasks of organizing people, motivating people despite disappointment and turning motivation into social action. “The ministers gave themselves, their time, their contributions, their minds, their prayers, and their leadership, all of which set examples for the laymen to follow” (Garrow, 2).

Reverends played a crucial role within their communities. In the 20th century the profession of being a reverend meant that they were leaders of their churches and the “individuals ultimately responsible for the overall functioning of the diverse communities and groups” (Morris 1989, 7). Reverends were the leaders behind the organization of the boycott. Stories of reverends like MLK, Nixon and Shuttlesworth demonstrate this central role within anti-segregation groups. Martin Luther King, still seen as the leader, savior, and the force behind the Bus Boycott, stands in high regard with many people. Blacks at the time needed

someone to follow, they needed someone to take the lead and be an example. MLK was the people's savior. MLK had many roles during the Boycott; leader, president, role-model and national spokesperson. "King's skills as an orator and leader propelled the protest onto the national stage" (300), historians as Wilson contended.

Reverend Donny Williams, who participated in the boycott, talked about MLK as the liberator of oppression in stating that "It was just like when God sent Moses down to Egypt to bring his people out of slavery". Another participant in the boycott who drove people around, was Samuel Gadson, he also talks about King as the savior, "I don't know if you follow Scripture, but he was the second Moses," he said. "He decided his people were looking for the Promised Land and that he would lead them there". He was the leader of the organization, and he was followed by the people, not by force, but by choice.

MLK was not the only religious leader involved in the Boycott. E.D. Nixon was, like MLK, a reverend and was arguably the person to set the boycott in motion. Nixon was greatly underestimated in this work during the CRM and especially during the boycott. Nixon was instrumental in getting the case of Rosa Parks the local attention needed for a boycott the size of Montgomery. He personally picked Rosa Parks up from the policy station and asked her the defining question, as he recalled, "I said, Mrs. Parks, I said, 'With your permission we can break down segregation on the bus with your case.'" (Nixon) Her answer was "I'll support it", and with that the boycott was set in motion. The next morning Nixon started calling people, including reverend Ralph D. Abernathy, Reverend H. H. Hubbard and Martin Luther King. They all agreed to be part of the bus boycott. After calling 18 more people, Nixon set a meeting at the church of MLK. An article in the newspaper appeared and Nixon started calling ministers again, and told them "Read it. Take it to church with you. Tell the peoples what is happening. Tell them that we want two thousand people at Holt Street Baptist Church tomorrow night for the purpose of letting the folks know that we aren't going to take this laying down no longer" (Nixon). This shows the importance of both the reverends and the church in mobilizing people for action. The church was the means by which people gained information about the boycott, placing the church at the center of the protest.

In this chapter it became clear that there were three bodies key in getting the boycott started and were essential to the organization and the success of the boycott. Firstly, the black church and its clergy. They formed the organizational base of the movement and brought the African-American community together towards a common goal. The second group, the African-American community, was also key in shaping the boycott. They participated. Without

their support the boycott could not have taken place. Thirdly, the civil rights organizations like the NAACP and MIA also played a central role in getting the boycott started. Early on the NAACP created a model for how a civil rights organization was run. This in turn set an example for the Montgomery Improvement Association on how to organize. These organization aided the black church in the process of mobilization and organization. The second chapter closely looks at the role of the black church during the boycott. It gives a clear overview of continued mobilization and direct action.

2. The Boycott and Mobilization

After the road to the Boycott was paved through both a change in the black church landscape and the African-American community getting ready for a fight, it was now time for a full fledged boycott. MLK gave a speech at the Holt Street Baptist Church at the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It was the first act in mobilizing blacks against segregation on busses. This first address confirmed the powerful role of the church as an organization. The meeting was held in a church, with reverend MLK as spokesperson and with the leaders of the MIA present. More importantly, for this first address of the boycott, thousands of people showed up to the meeting. “Cars were lined up from 7 to 15 blocks in every direction and thousands of African Americans were streaming toward the building” (Wilson, 304). They all wanted to witness this start in massive resistance towards segregation. This first mass-meeting demonstrates the power of the church in getting a message across to its constituents and assembling them towards taking action. This again shows the base the church formed for organized protest and mobilization of the masses.

This chapter will address the continued mobilization and the Montgomery bus boycott. It gives a chronological overview of the boycott, highlighting important aspects concerning the black church and its efforts for continued mobilization. Furthermore it addresses the use of non-violence and religion to organize and motivate the African-American community during the boycott. Additionally it addresses the non-participation of the white church during the boycott.

With his speech at the Holt Street Baptist Church, MLK urged the people not to use violence, but to use protest as the voice urging for change:

“We are here, we are here this evening because we're tired now. And I want to say, that we are not here advocating violence. We have never done that. I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are Christian people. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. That's all” (MLK, Holy Street Baptist Church Speech).

With his speech MLK tied the protest to religion. As explained earlier, religion was used to bring the message of non-violent direct action across, making religion a powerful tool in mobilizing people and urging for non-violent direct action. Wilson argues that “King later would understand the boycott as something more than just an economic challenge to the Montgomery City Lines. It was in the spiritual terms of the black church where it began, an act

of faith, a confrontation with evil that invited a righteous God to protect his people and exercise his wrath” (Wilson, 319).

In his Holt Street speech MLK underlines that religious values are vital in their fight for desegregation on the busses, “we must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our actions” (MLK, Holy Street Baptist Church Speech). By aligning Christian values with the protest, MLK effectively called for non-violence. This can be explained through the Ten Commandments as preached in the Bible, which urge non-violence, respect and forgiveness. It became evident that the African-American community adhered to the use of religion in services. They responded to the religious and non-violent undertone of the protest. Religious and church culture were therefore important factors during the bus boycott. “The culture of the black church helped leaders to frame the meaning of the nonviolent message and encouraged churchgoers to respond to it positively” (Calhoun-Brown, 170). This demonstrates the power of religion in forming and substantiating the message of passive action.

Pinn, another historian in the field of black religion and the church, argues that “in addition to providing bodies willing to participate in direct action, disseminate information, and finance protest activities, the Black Church also provided the ideological and theological underpinning for the movement” (Pinn, 13) (qt. in Gaines II, 370). MLK was key in conveying this theological message of Christianity combined with equality, to all people of the U.S. He “took the democratic tradition of freedom and combined it with the biblical tradition of justice and liberation as found in the Exodus and the prophets” (Cone, 762). Exodus refers to the liberation from slavery in Egypt and the search to the Promised Land. Two key definitions linked to the Bible book; the prophets, are social justice and righteousness. MLK wanted all blacks to be liberated from discrimination and segregation. He wanted social justice for blacks, and to finally be equal to whites. He interlinked the American dream of freedom and democracy to the black dream of desegregation and equal rights. Previously the American dream was only obtainable for whites and not for blacks. King “developed a theology that was effective in challenging all Americans to create the beloved community in which all persons are equal” (Cone, 762). This was done through non-violence. As Hines and Pierce detailed, “by using the Gandhian technique of non-violence, he brought to the protest that symbolic representation needed to transform frustrations into demands” (168). The boycott therefore, besides linking Christian values to non-violence, set a global example for successful non-violent protests.

After the first initial one-day boycott, church leaders were not sure whether the African-American community would agree with a long-lasting boycott. On December 7 1995, Two days

after MLK gave his Holy Street address, the first MIA meeting was set to take place. Reverend Abernathy remembered that “we [King and Abernathy] feared that if we extended it by beyond the first day, we might fail; it might be better after all to call the protest off, and then we could hold this “one-day boycott” as a threat for future negotiations” (Burns, 94). Abernathy and King decided to wait and see if the African-American community was interested in sustaining the movement for a longer period of time. When they arrived however, there were so many people that both reverends had trouble getting into the church. “It was apparent to us that the people were with us”, as recalled by Abernathy of that first MIA meeting. The community came together, and showed the ministers, whites and each other, that they were ready to take action. Abernathy described it as “the expression of togetherness on the part of the masses was obviously in inspiration to the leadership and helped to rid it of the cowardly, submissive, over timidity” (Burns, 94). Both the people and the church inspired each other to continue with the protest. This marked the need for leadership, but also for the masses to participate. Mary Jo Smiley, a participant in the movement, talked about the role of the church and the masses; “Every movement has leaders, and we had excellent ones at that time, the people of Montgomery made that boycott successful. The leaders had the strategy, but the people had the strength.”

After that initial meeting and throughout the month of December it became clear to the church leaders, the MIA and the Montgomery public that the boycott was going to last. The ministers of the MIA (including reverends like Abernathy and King) made a proposal listing their demands and made them public later that month. They felt that the public had the right to know why the boycott was set in motion, and which demands were linked to it. They explained that the protest was not a reaction to the arrest of Mrs. Parks, but the culmination of multiple incidents and continued harassment on busses (Burns, 108). The leaders of MIA made up a proposal explaining their requests to the bus companies and the city of Montgomery. These included three requirements towards the bus lines, in order to effectively call off the boycott. The first requirement set out to create the notion of common courtesy towards blacks on busses. Secondly, seating on busses would be on a “First-come, First Served” basis, meaning that blacks would begin seating from the back of the bus, and whites from the front. No passenger would be ordered to move once they were seated, eliminating the notion of blacks having to stand up for whites. Thirdly, the leaders of the MIA asked for the employment of black bus drivers in highly populated black areas (Burns, 108). The leaders of the boycott initially therefore never asked for complete desegregation on the busses. This did mean that the NAACP did not officially enter the case, mainly because of the proposals made by the MIA leaders, which

were, in the eyes of the NAACP, insufficient. The NAACP was currently engaged in a court case in South Carolina, also trying to end segregation on the busses there. As becomes clear in a letter from the executive secretary of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins, “we could not enter an Alabama case asking merely for more polite segregation” (Burs, 110). Until the demands set by the ministers of the MIA were met, the African-American community continued its boycott against the city bus lines. This required continued organization by the black church and its clergymen.

After the primary upheaval surrounding the boycott, its leaders needed to keep blacks devoted to the cause. This required a lot of organization by the civil rights groups, but most importantly, by the black church and its leaders. This was done through mass meetings and Sunday sermons by clergymen. Weekly information meetings held on Monday nights created a communication center within churches. These centers were essential for handing out information and instructions and to keep people motivated. (Garrow, 15). These were places where people could hear about the phase of the protest, meet with other blacks to talk about their struggles and find spiritual and moral renewal (467, McKinney). The churches and its leaders provided leadership, direction and advice to the African-American community. Morris talked about the style in which mass meetings were organized and executed: “When leaders addressed the meeting their style of presentation was tooted in the tradition of the church sermon, which elicited the mass response of ‘amen’” (1989, 47). This again demonstrated the power of the church within the protest and its meetings. Morris further argued that “mass participation at meetings was usually guaranteed because scripture reading, prayer and hymns were built directly into the program” (1989, 47). Gwen Patton, a young girl during the boycott bus an active participant, remembered what it was like to attend a mass meeting. She recalled that every Monday night it was “Monday motivation.” She continued that “you were truly motivated at the Monday mass meetings,” in doing so Patton described the churches as “movement centers”. Furthermore Patton explains that “houses of worship were not simply for solace of the spirit, they were also disseminators of information, the hubs of strategic planning and the think-tanks of the movement” (Patton). It becomes clear that the churches were the centers of mobilization and that the churches were places for people to come together and organize for change.

Two months after the boycott was set in motion, on February 1st 1956, a prominent civil rights lawyer, Fred Gray – who was part of the NAACP legal team in Montgomery and additionally lawyer to Rosa Parks – started a court case to end segregation on the busses in

Montgomery with the case *Browder v. Gayle*. With this case a class action was brought against “state and city officials, the company operating the local buses in the city, and certain of its bus drivers, seeking a declaratory judgement and injunction (...) asking for racial segregation on city bus lines be declared in violation with the Unites States Constitution” (Burns, 270). Gray took the case to the federal court, because he knew that “if we were going to ever solve the problems of the buses, it was going to take an action in federal court because the State of Alabama would never let you get a federal constitutional issue decided in the Alabama Supreme Court” (Entin, 747). While this case was set in motion, blacks continued the boycott.

With so many blacks not taking the busses, another form of transportation needed to be set in place. Church leaders had to come up with alternate ways to get people to and from work. This was done by setting up a carpool network. During the boycott, this alternate transportation system represented a major accomplishment in social mobilization (Alderman, Kingsbury and, Dwyer, 176). Rufus Lewis was the chairmen of the Transportation Committee in Montgomery. This was an organization set up to provide transportation for blacks not taking the buses. For the carpool to work, the committee needed help from community members who owned cars. Lewis remembers “we asked for persons who had cars, and would voluntarily put them in the transportation pool, to let us know, and what time they could be used” (Lewis). This required a lot of organization on the part of the transportation committee. This carpool was key in keeping people motivated to continue the boycott. Without the carpool it can be questioned if the boycott could have lasted as long as it did.

Bayard Rustin was a prominent leader during the CRM. Rustin recorded his experiences during the boycott in his “Montgomery Diary”. On February 24th, 3 months into the boycott, Rustin, wrote that the boycott was still going strong. “42.000 have not ridden the busses since December 5th”. By now the transportation committee had set up 23 dispatch centers where people gathered to get free transportation Rustin explains. Rustin met with Lewis on that same morning and talked to him about the carpool. He quoted Lewis in saying that “the success of the car pool is at the heart of the movement, it must not be stopped” (Burns, 167). This shows the crucial role the carpool system had in maintaining the bus boycott.

Another recollection Burns presented in his book is a *New York Times* article written by Wayne Phillips. Phillips described a mass-meeting attended by 2000 blacks in February of 1956, in a Baptist church. He describes black church leaders taking the stage and urging their followers to “shun the city’s” buses and “walk with God” (Burns, 161). This shows that 3

months into the boycott people were still attending mass-meetings, preachers we're still mobilizing blacks, but more importantly people were still not riding the busses. Even though, as Phillips describes, eighty-nine church leaders had been arrested the day before, there was no talk about quitting (Burns, 162). The guidance of the church and its ability to mobilize the people, together with the participation of the whole community made the boycott endure. This kind of community participation was not found in the white church however. This was mainly because the white church did not adopt an active role for, or against segregation during the boycott.

In contrast to black church, the white church was not at all active during the boycott. This is remarkable because the white church has used religion and scripture in the past to justify slavery and discrimination against African-Americans (Glock, 72). White ministers stayed out of the boycott, mainly because they felt it was not their place to act, even though many thought and "accepted that segregation was unconstitutional and un-Christian" (Fairclough, 13). *The National Council of Churches* (NCC) was also expected to play an active role during the CRM, but this thus did not happen. The NCC was the overarching body of many Christian communities in the US, who strive for unity. The NCC tried to stay out of the movement through not voicing opinions on the matter of racial (in)equality. Religiously committed activists however, felt that "the churches should be at the forefront in pressing for an end to segregation" (Findlay, 20). This feeling of frustration spread through churches and reached black church leaders who were inclined to take action themselves. This permeated through the churches and clergymen throughout the South who wanted to take action, which they did through the boycott. This shows the power of the church and its leaders to mobilize people in a time of inequality and struggle. This furthermore indicates that the movement had to come from and by the people with the support of the leaders of the black church.

There were however some whites who participated in the boycott. As a white journalist during the boycott, Bob Ingram, took part, as one of the only whites in aiding blacks during the bus boycott. He praised the black preachers who lead the movement "Those preachers represented the heart and soul of the civil rights movement in Montgomery back then" (Ingram). A white preacher aiding blacks in the movement was reverend Robert Graetz, a white preacher to a black congregation. Just like King, Abernathy and Shuttlesworth he preached for integration, and told his followers to believe in God and believe in the boycott. He explained the importance of religion and the church within the boycott "This was a movement of the church, the Christian church in the black community" (Graetz). Even with inaction of white

churched as a whole, some reverends still decided this fight for equality was crucial. Both these clergymen demonstrate that the church was what motivated their congregations to support and actively engage in civil rights protests.

It can therefore be said that unlike white churches, black churches were places where mobilization for action took place, but also where people could go for sanctuary, freedom of speech and to acquire information. As stated by Calhoun-Brown, “Churches provided the organizational resources needed by participants in the movement” (Calhoun-Brown, 171). As argued by Morris, “Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; and institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle” (Morris 1989, 4). The black church supplied the people who wanted change with the means to make this change possible. Because of the economic independence from whites the black church enjoyed, whites had nothing no say in matters of the black church. It gave people the notion of how life could be without segregation. This therefore made the church a perfect institution to initiate change. This position suggests that “the political and economic gains of Blacks during the 1950s and the 1960s would have been impossible without the religious fervor of activist Blacks, the leadership and prestige of Black religious officials, the support of some religious organizations, and a substantial following of religious Black citizens” (Vedlitz, Alston and Pinkele, 369). This amounted to a U.S. Supreme Court decision which ended segregation on the busses in Montgomery.

On June 5th, 1956 the Montgomery Federal Court ruled in favor of *Browder v. Gayle* and therefore declared segregation on busses in Montgomery unconstitutional. The court held that “segregation violated the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the fourteenth amendment, the doctrine of separate-but-equal as appealed to public transportation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* having been impliedly overruled” (Burns, 270). On November 13th that same year, the Supreme Court of the United States enforced the Montgomery federal court’s ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, constitutionally ending segregation on the busses in Montgomery (Burns, 300). The boycott continued until the high court’s ruling was officially implemented and effectively enforced five weeks later on the 21st of December.

Conclusion

The black church played a central role in the bus boycott. Without the involvement of the black church and the African-American community the boycott would not have gained the momentum it did. The boycott succeeded because a solid, predominantly church-related leadership base emerged, the organizational structure of this leadership base was aided by civil rights organizations, and the African-American community came together to fight segregation. Furthermore a solid organizational base was developed which kept the African-American community motivated during the year-long boycott. The black church made sure that participants were informed about the boycott, it provided a functional meeting place, and motivated people in pointing at a broadly shared religious conviction. The leaders of the black churches formed a front for mobilization and stuck together despite denominational differences. Because reverends enjoyed social and economic independence from whites, they were less vulnerable to pressure. In this process the church was therefore not solely a place to communicate values directly to a broader public, it also validated religious protest as a method for desired change. With the recognition of the US Supreme Court to end segregation in the busses in Montgomery, the notion of non-violence as a means for protest was validated.

Research has been done to investigate why in Montgomery a bus boycott was the most effective protest to demand desegregation in public accommodations. Organizations like the NAACP and MIA were key in the fight for equal rights, and supported the black church any way possible. Furthermore clergymen played an essential role in the boycott and the CRM. The leaders of the churches were imperative to the boycott in initiating and forming the organizational base for the massive protest. Reverends like Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, and E.D. Nixon were major players in the Montgomery Boycott. Together with clergymen, the African-American community and the civil rights organizations were of vital importance in establishing a well-run protest.

It is demonstrated that for the people who participated in the boycott, the church formed information centers within the movement this was done through mass-meetings and during Sunday services. It is also discussed how the church mobilized people for their common cause. The church and its clergymen used Sunday mornings in church and its central place in the lives of blacks to convey the message of desegregation. Reverends used their Sunday services and mass-meetings to bring across new information about the protest. Because so many blacks attended these services, this was an efficient way to reach many in the African-American community. In comparison it is significant to notice that the white church did not actively

participate in any way during the boycott. They stayed out of the debate in order to avoid conflict with its members.

The success in Montgomery led to more action, in multiple places, on a larger scale during the CRM. The Boycott was not the ultimate goal but an important step on the road to end segregation and discrimination against blacks on a nationwide scale. The boycott helped prepare the expectance of social action as a form of protest against injustice. The boycott therefore paved the way for many other social protests in the CRM. To do justice to the significance of the boycott it cannot be seen as an incident, it must be viewed in its significance as a milestone on the road to ending segregation as a whole.

This thesis shows that the black church played an irreplaceable role during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Without the organizational base the black church formed, mobilization and action would have been to be disorganized and without structure. The role of the black church was vital for the success of the Boycott for multiple reasons. First of all, charismatic leaders motivated people in the services and mass-meetings, but could also be legitimate representatives in maintaining contacts with authorities. Secondly, the church formed a social and organizational structure, making the church both a place of sanctuary as well as a center for mobilization and handing out information. This additional role made it easier for community members to participate. Thirdly, it gave the struggle for equal rights a legitimate base in the eyes of many people in tying it to and motivating it in religious values. Fourthly, the church as an institution could provide material means in the form of money and buildings to facilitate the actions. Moreover with the (financial) help of organizations like the NAACP and MIA, the church created a good foundation for endurance. Lastly, in underlining and motivating the non-violent approach on Christian grounds the actions gained sympathy throughout the nation and eventually even worldwide

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